

## SOME PERSPECTIVES ON MY ART

From time immemorial, the word "inspiration" has been used when speaking of artistic production: since the distant age when the blind bard sang the exploits of the Greek and Trojan heroes, their extraordinary battles and the errors of Ulysses, as later they celebrated the battles of Charlemagne and Roland. In the final years of his short, brilliant life, Raphael was inspired by the Greco-Roman statues that had just emerged from the earth and debris in which they had lain buried for centuries. What would Poussin be without Rome and the Roman countryside? The same goes for Corot in his early years. *Inspiration* can also come from something read or heard. But only in modern art do we encounter the phenomenon of *revelation*. At least, Friedrich Nietzsche was the first to describe it and set it apart from every other aspect of creative genius; in his last book, *Ecce Homo*, he devotes an entire chapter to it. Revelation is something that suddenly appears to the artist, as if a curtain had been drawn aside, or a door opened; something that brings him great joy, great happiness, an almost physical pleasure, and that impels him to work. He is wonderstruck and pleased, like a child being handed a toy. The likeness between the joy of the artist touched by revelation and that of the child surprised by a present depends, I believe, on the fact that both joys are pure;

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the second because of the innocence of the person feeling it, and the first because he has been purified by the material and moral effort of creation. We read in the Laws of Manu: "The hands of the artisan are always pure when he is working." All the more so those of the artist.

Revelation seems to give us access to an unknown world; image follows upon image, and a small drawing or rapid sketch suffices to capture them: material for future works. The work that results from *inspiration* is at bottom no more than an amplification, an idealization of what one has seen: Poussin idealizes the Roman countryside, Louis Le Nain idealizes the peasants and beggars of his day. Whereas the work that derives from *revelation* is utterly detached from what elicited it. It stands on an entirely separate plane, in a completely different world and atmosphere. For example, my series of paintings called *Furniture in the Valley* was engendered by an idea that came to me one afternoon in Paris, as I was walking around Saint-Germain between Rue du Dragon and Rue du Vieux-Colombier.

On the sidewalk, in front of a used furniture shop, I saw sofas, chairs, wardrobes, tables, and a coat rack displayed right there on the street. By finding themselves so removed from the sacred place in which man has always sought repose, the place that each of us calls home, these objects—the mere sight of which arouses feelings and sentiments that delve back to our earliest childhood—suddenly appeared solemn, tragic, even mysterious. In the midst of the street noise, the comings-and-goings of a major capital's passions and fevers, these solitary items of furniture formed a kind of guarded enclave, a *loculus*, an impregnable zone against which the ambient hubbub and commotion broke like waves dying on a strand. One could easily imagine Orestes, pursued by the serpent-haired Furies, finding this safer haven than the

temple of Pallas Athena: after hanging his torn and dusty garments on the coat rack he would have dropped into the old Louis-Philippe arm-chair to enjoy some well-deserved rest; while the Furies, as if restrained by an invisible and all-powerful hand, would halt, seething with rage, at the threshold of this curious sanctuary. I immediately understood how I could take advantage of this vision, and I began painting furniture and corners of rooms, but set in the middle of vast and deserted Nature.

What name can we give such visions, or the feelings that disconcert us so? In avant-garde literature one word has enjoyed considerable success in the last few years: *atmosphere*. In this context, the word might correspond to the "certain idea" (*una certa idea*) that Raphael spoke of in his letters to Baldassare Castiglione; or to Socrates' famous demon; or again, to those who fill the world, as Heraclitus taught under the porticos of the Temple of Artemis.

Corresponding to the *atmosphere* of displaced furniture is the atmosphere of temples and outdoor areas installed in rooms. I painted Greek temples surrounded by rocks and fountains, with roads bearing traces of cart wheels, but set on a floor beneath a low ceiling. The lowness of the ceiling is very important, since the metaphysical atmosphere in Greek art is largely due to the sense of just proportion found in the lines of a landscape, and even in the air: in Greece, the sky does not seem so infinite as it does in other countries. At times, you almost feel you could reach out and touch it. This explains the familiarity between gods and humans in Greek mythology: heroes and men of genius rose after their deaths to the immortals' abode, the way one climbs to the fifth floor of a building; while gods came down more or less in disguise to participate in human life, like monarchs traveling incognito. This is the opposite of what happens in the North: the gods



at the far end of their receding, dizzying sky are inaccessible; and even in the most whimsical flight of fancy, we would have to have absolutely no sense of harmony to give a Greek temple the outsized dimensions of a Gothic cathedral.

This intrusion of Nature upon dwellings, as I've tried to suggest it, is reminiscent of the alliance between gods and men that imbues all of Greek art. By participating in human life, the gods became only more divine. I felt this in Olympia one moonlit night when, peering in through the windows of the museum built on the banks of the muddy Alpheus among the pines and the ruins, I gazed at Praxiteles' masterpiece, the statue of Hermes. This statue stands on a very low pedestal, so that when surrounded by visitors it appears to be alive as well. One would almost expect it to move and talk; to start walking, go outside, and vanish.

In fact, it is a serious aesthetic—and I would even say, metaphysical—error to place statues on overly high pedestals, and especially to perch them atop columns. Schopenhauer denounced this heresy, which is especially common in Germany. To my knowledge, there is only one city where statues have low pedestals, and that is Turin. This city, ideally suited to delight a metaphysical aesthete, is populated by statues: of kings, princes, statesmen, sages, and artists. They are all there, in stone or bronze, on horseback or on foot, in uniforms or frock coats; amid cannons, banners, and little pyramids of balls; or else surrounded by books, at their worktables, hands resting on scientific instruments or grasping scrolls on which laws have been inscribed. And each one is set practically at street-level, so that from afar they seem to be part of the city's movement, to bathe in the life they so long ago left behind.

Turin inspired the entire series of canvases that I painted from 1912 to 1915. In all honesty, I should add that these paintings owe a great deal to Friedrich Nietzsche, whom I read passionately at the time. His *Ecce Homo*, written in Turin shortly before he succumbed to madness, greatly helped me understand the city's peculiar beauty. The best season for Turin, the one that lets its metaphysical charm show through most clearly, is autumn. This autumn has nothing in common with the autumn of the Romantics, with cloud-laden skies and dead leaves and departing swallows; Lamartine's autumn, sung by so many poets: a forlorn season that makes the traveler hasten his steps toward home and beckons those lingering on the mountains and beaches to return to the city; the season of All Souls' Day, weeping willows, and farewells to life. Autumn, as it revealed Turin to me and as Turin revealed it to me, is joyful, although certainly not in a gaudy, dazzling way. It's something huge, at once near and distant; a great peacefulness, great purity, rather closely related to the joy felt by a convalescent finally cured of a long and painful illness. It's the season of philosophers, poets, and artists inclined to philosophize. The afternoon shadows are long; everywhere a gentle stillness reigns. One might almost think that violent passions and evil sentiments have fled the hearts of men, who can now look each other in the eye without fear or envy. This autumn is made to please the "happy few." For my part, I believe that this harmony, which is so exquisite as to become almost unbearable, played no small part in Nietzsche's madness; his soul, already shaken, could not receive such shocks with impunity. On a fortunately smaller scale, I, too, suffered a period of melancholy and pessimism when this revelation spontaneously occurred to me. No doubt men might one day train themselves to withstand the

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shock of metaphysical discoveries, the way they do physical exercises today.

The new countenance shown us by autumn contrasts with that of spring, which, instead of being the time of happiness and hope, to us seems a forlorn season, as it already was for certain German Romantic painters of the nineteenth century and in this line from Heinrich Heine's "Rite of Spring": *This is the sorrowful joy of spring!*

Turin's autumnal charm is made still more penetrating by the rectilinear and geometric construction of the streets and squares, and by the porticos that let one stroll at leisure no matter what the weather. These arcades make the city appear as if it were built for philosophical disquisitions, for pensiveness and meditation. In Turin everything is an apparition. You enter a square and find yourself facing a stone man who stares at you as only a statue can. Sometimes the skyline is blocked by a wall behind which rises the whistle of a locomotive, or the clank of a departing train: all the nostalgia of infinity is revealed to us behind the geometrical precision of the square. These are unforgettable moments, when such aspects of the world—whose existence we did not even suspect—suddenly appear, revealing to us the mysterious things that are there, within our reach, at every moment, without our short-sightedness being able to make them out, our too imperfect senses being able to perceive them. Their silent calls, coming from so nearby but echoing like voices from another planet, can be heard only rarely by our human ears, accustomed as they are to the logical noises of life. These things, the knowledge of which brings us such joy and opens unknown vistas, provide us with precious and incredible reserves for our dry periods. But these same things that reveal themselves to us in friendship—as if to demonstrate their confidence in our creative



minds—sometimes like to play tricks on us, to hide, to melt into the surroundings so that we pass right by without seeing them, as the hunter, rifle under his arm, sometimes passes near the immobile quail hugging a clod of earth whose color matches its plumage.

This kind of research, which, if we imprudently push it too far, could become hazardous to our mental well-being, should not make us lose sight of the fact that we are also technicians and builders; that we have a worker's or artisan's task to fulfill. It's a commonplace to say that craft is far too neglected today. We are no longer in the time of the Flemish Renaissance, when painters' guilds levied fines and various punishments not only on members who had shown carelessness in executing a painting, but even on those who had incompletely wiped their palettes or poorly cleaned their brushes. Today, with only rare exceptions (among whom I am happy to number my friend, the distinguished Czech artist Zrzavy), artists show too little concern for their oh-so-difficult craft, under pretext of higher ambitions. And yet it is such a beautiful thing, and so restful, to search ceaselessly and forever in the vast realm of material refinements. This quest physically fatigues us, but such fatigue brings with it a mental relaxation that is as necessary to the artist as food or sleep. Without this rest, the only thing left for us to do would be to snap our brushes in two and give in to pure and simple meditation, to that cosmic daydream which is the most exquisite form of drunkenness, but the most perilous as well.

*translated by Mark Polizzotti*